

## INDEX TO BUSINESSES

This index of businesses mentioned in today's issue of The Wall Street Journal is intended to include all significant references to parent companies. First references to these companies appear in boldface type in all articles except those on page one, the editorial pages and the Leisure<sup>®</sup> & Arts page.

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# EPA Plans Asbestos Removal From Homes in Libby, Mont.

By SUSAN WARREN

In an unusual move, the Environmental Protection Agency says it will rip out asbestos-tainted insulation from hundreds of homes in Libby, Mont., because it poses a health hazard to residents.

The EPA is taking the position in Libby because asbestos contamination is spread widely throughout the town. Many townspeople worked in the vermiculite mine there owned by W.R. Grace Co., and discards were used as a soil supplement in residential gardens and schools. With a high rate of asbestos-related illnesses in Libby, the EPA said it wants to eliminate as many sources of exposure as possible.

"These people have just had such a cumulative exposure that we're trying to reduce anything that will make things worse for them," said Jack McGraw, EPA deputy administrator of Region 8, which includes Montana.

Grace and other manufacturers used vermiculite, a mineral, to make insulation from the 1930s through the 1970s.

Despite the Libby decision, the EPA said such a step isn't necessary for millions of homes around the country that contain similar insulation. Agency officials said the EPA is conducting new studies to determine whether the insulation poses a widespread hazard.

Until then, it is sticking to its long-held advice: "For homes outside of Libby, EPA continues to believe that the best strategy for asbestos-containing materials in buildings is to leave it in place, unless removal is necessary to prevent disturbance during renovations," it said in a statement.

The EPA estimated asbestos insulation could be in walls and attics of as many as 30 million homes throughout the country. The agency has long said it is harmless unless it is disturbed, which could release asbestos fibers into the air. When inhaled, asbestos can cause lung disease and an especially deadly form of cancer.

Agency officials took a closer look at the issue after they began an emergency cleanup of Libby in 1999. A December report by an EPA toxicologist labeled the insulation an "imminent and substantial endangerment to public health." Mr. McGraw said: even the slightest disturbance of the insulation, such as changing a light bulb, could release asbestos into the air.

Grace, based in Columbia, Md., has conducted its own studies and disputes the danger, saying the insulation contains only minuscule traces of asbestos, far below EPA hazard levels. "Zonolite insulation is safe. We think it's safe in Libby, and we think it's safe everywhere else," said Grace Chief Executive Paul Norris.

Environmental experts say the hazardous-site cleanup law hasn't previously applied to consumer products in private homes.

Grace already is facing a homeowners' lawsuit in Libby over the danger posed by their home insulation. Grace filed for bankruptcy protection last year, citing a flood of asbestos litigation.

The company said the EPA's didn't declare a public health emergency in Libby, showing that it, too, has concluded there isn't scientific or medical evidence to conclude the insulation is dangerous.

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